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SUBJECT: FEW HEADLINES AS ABU MAZEN DEFENDS HIS STANCE ON  
NEGOTIATIONS IN SPEECH TO THE PLO CENTRAL COUNCIL

REF: JERUSALEM 2004

Classified By: CG Daniel Rubinstein for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Summary. PA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) said little new on negotiations or his personal future in a December 15 speech to the opening session of a two-day PLO Central Council (PLO/CC) meeting in Ramallah, which convened primarily to extend his term as president beyond its expiration in late January 2010 until conditions allow for new elections. In his remarks, Abu Mazen reiterated his desire not to run in new elections, indirectly signalled support for new elections in June 2010, and once again mentioned unspecified "additional steps" he may take with regard to his personal future at a later time. The main focus of his forty-minute address was a spirited and sometimes defensive treatment of the PLO's past involvement in negotiations, but he put forward no new positions. Other topics covered included intra-Palestinian reconciliation, Palestinian prisoners, a possible UNSCR to delineate the borders of a Palestinian state, and criticism of unilateral GOI actions on settlements and in Jerusalem. Forthcoming polling data suggests that a thin majority of Palestinians view the decision to extend Abu Mazen's term beyond January 2010 as legitimate. End Summary.

PLO/CC Convenes to Extend Abu Mazen's Term  
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12. (C) On December 15, the PLO/CC (quasi-parliament) met in a long-anticipated session devoted to extending Abu Mazen's term in office. The session was held in response to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission's late October conclusion that it could not implement Palestinian elections as scheduled next January due to Hamas's refusal to cooperate with preparations in Gaza.

13. (C) Prior to the meeting, PLO and Fatah leaders agreed on language to continue Abu Mazen's mandate as president through new elections. Participants in these sessions said care was given to ensure this language did not contradict Abu Mazen's November 5 statement (reftel) that he does not desire to seek re-election. According to Fatah Central Committee (FCC) member Mahmoud Alool, Abu Mazen told the PLO and Fatah leadership over the weekend that he reserved the right to take any position he deemed appropriate, leading to some mild anxiety among Palestinian leaders that he might go beyond the language in his November 5 speech on his personal future.

Few Headlines in Abu Mazen's Address  
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14. (C) Despite this speculation, Abu Mazen's speech on the first day of the two-day PLO/CC session featured no new headlines on negotiations or his personal future. In a tone that alternated between defensiveness and joviality, he spent the better part of his forty-minute discourse addressing his

internal critics in front of the PLO/CC's roughly 130 members, representatives of the diplomatic community (including the Consul General), and the press, before breaking for the private afternoon session. The PLO/CC meeting is expected to conclude on Wednesday, December 16.

15. (C) Key themes in the speech included:

---Elections and Abu Mazen's future. After harsh criticism of Hamas ("they do not believe in elections, and they do not believe in the homeland"), Abu Mazen called for elections at all levels, including universities and unions. He indirectly referenced the Egyptian reconciliation document's call for elections in June 2010. As for his personal future, Abu Mazen reiterated the language used in his November 5 speech almost verbatim, noting that he would not run in future Palestinian elections and that he may take additional steps at a later time.

---EU Statement. Abu Mazen praised Swedish efforts to forge an EU Foreign Ministers' statement that explicitly mentioned East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, and decried those who worked against the goal. While the Palestinians did not get all that the desired from the EU, he praised the final document as an "important step."

---Possible UNSCR. In coordination with the Arab League's Arab Peace Initiative Follow-Up Committee, the Palestinians seek to build on the EU statement to pursue a UN Security Council Resolution which would enshrine the 1967 border as the reference point for negotiating the border of a future Palestinian state. He dismissed those who accused the

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Palestinians of unilateralism, noting his desire to consult with the EU, Russia, China, and the U.S. before moving to the UNSC.

---Criticism of Settlement Activity. Abu Mazen was dismissive of the GOI's settlement moratorium, particularly its exclusion of Jerusalem, provision for construction of 3,000 settlement housing units, and public buildings. He blamed continued settlement activity for the failure of past negotiations, and criticized the recent GOI decision to place some settlements on the National Priority Areas map for the purpose of extending subsidies. He also criticized unilateral GOI actions in East Jerusalem and the recent attack by settlers on a mosque near Nablus.

---Negotiations. This issue featured prominently in his speech. After a long and sometimes repetitive discourse on the history of PLO involvement in negotiations, he dismissed Palestinian criticism of "useless negotiations" and "concessions" by jovially singling out some of his critics in the audience by name, defining the PLO's acceptance of UNSCRs 242 and 338 and recognition of Israel as the only strategic concession it has made, and by noting that the PLO has only engaged in permanent status negotiations for short periods in 2000 and 2008. He reiterated his eight point message on negotiations (reftel), his commitment to a peaceful, nonviolent solution to the conflict, and his longstanding position on acceptable terms of reference for resuming negotiations.

---No Preconditions, But Obligations. In a new take on an old theme, Abu Mazen referred repeatedly to a November 17 op-ed by New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, strongly criticizing the assertion that the Palestinians have imposed "preconditions" for negotiations. Instead, the PA seeks Israeli fulfillment of its Roadmap obligations, Abu Mazen said. He also reiterated the PA's longstanding rejection of a state with provisional borders, characterizing this as an "optional not mandatory" element of Phase Two of the Roadmap, and contrasting this with the obligatory elements of Phase One, which he maintained Israel has failed to honor.

---Performance of the PA. Abu Mazen offered perfunctory praise for the efforts of the PA government to deliver services to the Palestinian people, particularly in the area of security.

---Prisoner Exchange. Responding to speculation that he opposes a prisoner swap of IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit for a Hamas-dominated group of prisoners, Abu Mazen said "we are for the prisoner exchange" and went on to note that he supports the inclusion of jailed Fatah Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouthi in a deal.

---Reconciliation. Abu Mazen retold the story of Egyptian mediation efforts over the past two months, and blamed Hamas' refusal to accept the draft GOE proposal for the current stalemate. (He also half-jokingly blamed the slow pace of discussions on negotiators' frequent stays in Cairo's "seven star" hotels.)

---Goldstone. In a brief but irreverent portion of the speech, Abu Mazen referred to "Mohammed" Goldstone (in a reference to the prophet) but otherwise made no new statements on this issue.

#### Thin Majority View Extension As Legitimate

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16. (C) Separately, Palestinian pollster Nader Said briefed Post on a forthcoming survey which included questions on how Palestinians view the use of the PLO to extend Abu Mazen's term in the absence of elections. Said noted that a small majority of Palestinians (55 percent) support the use of the PLO/CC as the legal authority to extend Abu Mazen's term. He described the level of support as unimpressive, and speculated that it may reflect general Palestinian discontent over the current political situation.

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